

# On the Inside Looking Out

## Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Furnished Interiors

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**I**n 1992, The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* were revised to apply to all historic resource types included in the National Register of Historic Places. The acceptable treatments outlined in the document are "preservation," "rehabilitation," "restoration," and "reconstruction." Subsequently, the National Park Service published two sets of guidelines based on the Secretary's Standards: *Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings* in 1995 and *Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* in 1996. Since the 1992 revision of the Secretary's *Standards*, a small group of historic site specialists has been formulating a similar set of guidelines addressing historic furnished interiors.

The preservation standards require retention of the greatest amount of historic fabric, along with the interior's historic form, features, and detailing as they have evolved over time. The rehabilitation standards acknowledge the need to alter or add to a historic interior to meet continuing or new uses while retaining the building's historic character. The restoration standards allow for the depiction of a historic interior at a particular time in its history by preserving materials from the period of significance and removing materials from other periods. The reconstruction standards establish a limited framework for recreating a vanished or non-surviving interior with new materials, primarily for interpretive purposes.

The development of the *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Furnished Interiors* is less straightforward than the other two sets of guidelines because there is no national organization to which all historic site specialists belong. There is no common language shared by all such specialists. The National Register does not recognize site collections as a property type. The mobility of historic furnishings makes their relationship to a historic structure and other furnishings change-

able and fragile. Therefore, in addition to addressing issues of best practice, the *Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Furnished Interiors* discusses the importance of site collections to a historic site and attempts to provide a common vocabulary that historic site specialists can use in the future. The guidelines are now in draft form.

To work easily with the other two sets of guidelines, those for historic furnished interiors contain an introduction, a narrative section for each of the four treatments, and a grid that outlines "recommended" and "not-recommended" treatment practices. The guidelines do not possess the force of law or regulation. Instead, they emphasize the importance of preliminary research in making treatment decisions and provide a philosophical framework in which to consider a particular historic furnished interior.

### ***Why Apply the Secretary's Standards to Historic Furnished Interiors?***

When used together in the future, the guidelines for historic furnished interiors, buildings, and cultural landscapes will allow historic site specialists to analyze the various components of a historic site as an integrated whole. Ideally, the treatment of a site's interior, building, and landscape will be consistent. Failure to treat the site consistently may result in a "false history," the creation of a property that never existed. Nevertheless, because of the mutable quality of furnishings, it is often the case that a historic building will possess a much higher degree of integrity than the furnished interior it contains. When there is disparity among treatments, it is essential that visitors learn through interpretive means how and why the treatments vary.

Site collections should be documented and protected because they are movable and often lack the integrity of location and setting. This mutability should not be a discouragement, but rather an impetus for the better documentation and understanding of the historic furnished interior.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of site-associated collections. The National Park Service specifically recommends that original, site-associated collections be described and evaluated as contributing features when completing National Register documentation. Using the standards in the treatment of site-associated furnished interiors will further encourage the recognition of their significance and the protection of this important resource.

#### ***What is a Historic Furnished Interior?***

A historic furnished interior is a collection of architectural features, finishes, and site-associated or site-appropriate furnishings organized in space inside a historic building. As an assemblage, these features often share a common history of ownership and use at the site. Historic furnished interiors encompass private homes, work spaces, and public spaces. Historic furnished interiors can provide particularly powerful and evocative interpretive experiences as the spaces where significant historical events took place.

Historic furnished interiors are linked to time. A restored or reconstructed historic furnished interior depicts the building's period of greatest significance. A preserved historic furnished interior depicts the accumulation of changes over a specific time period. In practice, however, it is very unusual to find a historic furnished interior that is "pure" to any one treatment.

For the purposes of these standards and guidelines, historic furnished interiors are narrowly defined. Historic furnished interiors must be associated with a specific place and time. As defined here, period rooms in an art museum or historic house are not historic furnished interiors. These treatments are no less important or educational than the historic furnished interior. In fact, the process of research and implementation for these installations can be very similar, but they are not subject to the same constraints of place and time when choosing a treatment.

#### ***Character-Defining Features***

A character-defining feature is a prominent or distinctive tangible object in a historic furnished interior that contributes significantly to its physical character. Interior architectural features, finishes, furnishings, and the visual components of mechanical systems may be such features.

**Interior Spaces.** Interior spaces are defined by interior architectural features (e.g., ceilings, floors, walls). The arrangement, sequence, size, and proportion of interior spaces are individu-

ally and collectively important in defining the historic character of a building. Interiors are comprised of a series of public, private, and service spaces. Understanding the function, size, and location of a building's interior spaces is essential to a successful treatment.

**Interior Design.** As defined in the guidelines, whether a designed or vernacular historic interior, "interior design" encompasses all aspects of an interior except for the structural architectural features. These aspects include color, material, texture, pattern, and spatial organization. Spatial organization describes how the objects relate to circulation patterns, architectural features, and other objects. The relationship between the size and scale of furnishings and the room in which they exist can be a character-defining feature. In the case of some residential and commercial interiors, the arrangement of furnishings may be important in its own right as the work of a well-known craftsman, architect/designer, or interior designer.

**Architectural Features.** The design and treatment of walls, floors, ceilings, windows, and stairways contribute to the significance and historic character of an interior. Among the architectural features to consider are columns, cornices, baseboards, fireplaces and mantels, paneling, hardware, and light fixtures.

**Finishes.** Finishes to consider are wallpaper, plaster, paint, stenciling, marbling, graining, and other decorative treatments that accent interior features. These finishes provide color, texture, and pattern to walls, floors, and ceilings.

Architectural features and finishes may be significant as works of art—the product of an important craftsman or a frescoed wall or painted ceiling by an important artist.

**Furnishings.** A historic furnished interior is also defined by its contents. Each object can be considered on its own merits in terms of form, ornament, color, materials, craftsmanship, function, style, date, attribution, ownership history, and condition. Some furnishings may be important as works of art—the products of master or traditional craftsmen or the works of well-known artists. The dynamic nature of furnishings and interior design should be kept in mind at all times. Throughout their history, furnishings could have been altered, re-arranged, re-designed, and functionally re-defined. The assemblage of collection objects must be considered as a whole: How was the assemblage cre-

ated? How were the objects manufactured or adapted for use? Is there one style or a range of styles? A comparison of the ensemble to that in other similar historic interiors provides the basis for defining the significance of the assemblage as a whole.

**Mechanical Components.** The existence and practical use of mechanical systems influence some structural and decorative decisions. The visible decorative elements of historic mechanical systems such as grilles, radiators, lighting fixtures, and switchplates may contribute to the overall historic character of the furnished interior.

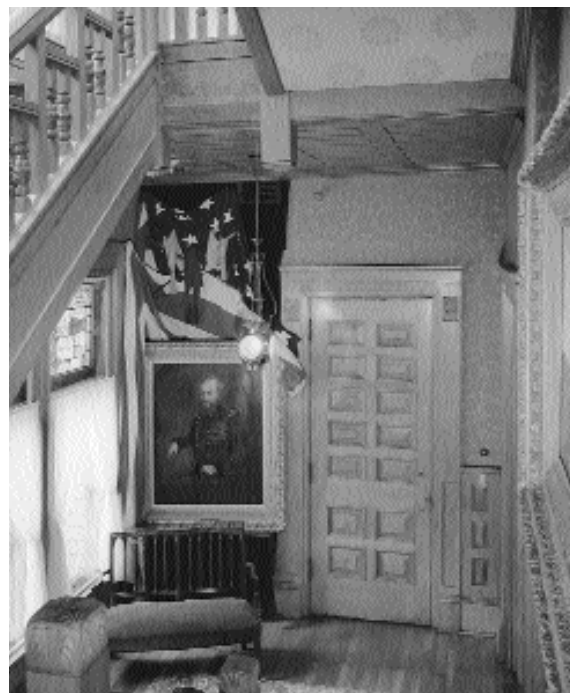
#### ***Preservation Planning and the Research of Historic Furnished Interiors***

Before any changes are made to the historic furnished interior, its current condition must be fully recorded. Careful planning prior to treatment can help prevent the loss or diminishment of resources and can inform future decisions concerning the treatment of a historic furnished interior. An on-going record of the investigative, decision-making, and physical treatment processes should be kept to inform future administrators and planning efforts. In all treatments for historic furnished interiors, the following general recommendations apply:

- Documentation of the actual work process is an essential and often overlooked part of any treatment.
- Planning and research for historic furnished interiors must be an interdisciplinary process. The treatment of the historic building and the cultural landscape should be taken into consideration when selecting a treatment option. However, protecting and preserving significant resources are more important than selecting a single treatment tied to one date or date range.
- Historical research must be undertaken to provide an overview of the building's construction history, analysis of historical occupancy, history of furnishings, and evidence of room use. This research should also address the cultural and historic value of the interior and evaluate its significance within the context of other related interiors. Preparation of a historic structure report and historic furnishings report is the most common method for compiling this documentation. This baseline information is needed before a treatment option is selected and a full treatment plan developed.
- Site-associated documentation and physical evidence are of prime importance to the preservation planning process.



*The 1888 photograph of the stair landing, Lawnfield, James A. Garfield National Historic Site, in Mentor, Ohio, depicts the contents of the room that Lucretia Garfield, the president's widow, created as a tribute to her husband when she enlarged the house in 1885. Photo courtesy Western Reserve Historical Society.*



*The current installation of the same space includes original and recreated furnishings to accurately restore the room's appearance. Photo courtesy Michael Carpenter, Department of Historic Furnishings, Harpers Ferry Center, National Park Service.*

- Assessing an interior as a continuum through history is critical in understanding its cultural and historic value. Based on analysis, individual features may be attributed to a discrete period of introduction, their presence or absence substantiated to a given date, and therefore the interior's significance and integrity evaluated.
- The ease with which furnishings can be rearranged or removed from a setting requires a more flexible definition of integrity of location. The integrity of an interior is not necessarily lost by the removal of character-defining features (movable furnishings) from their original location. However, if a historic site has an intact, preserved interior, it is critical that every aspect of the historic furnished interior be documented before any objects are moved or otherwise changed by the commencement of project work.
- Historic furnished interiors include textiles and other fragile materials that often require replacement to ensure the protection of original fabric and to maintain integrity of design and feeling. As a result, a flexible definition of integrity of materials is required. The degree of replacement may determine the appropriate treatment. Replacement of fragile items must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

#### ***Factors in Choosing Treatment***

A treatment is a physical intervention carried out to achieve a historic preservation goal—it cannot be considered in a vacuum. There are many practical and philosophical variables that influence the selection of a treatment for a furnished interior:

**Change and Continuity.** Change is inherent in furnished interiors, the result of material deterioration and human activities. Despite change, an interior will usually retain continuity of architectural form, and may retain continuity of use, features, or materials.

**Relative Significance in History.** A historic furnished interior may be locally, regionally, or nationally significant for its association with an important event or person. An interior also may be a rare survivor or the work of a master craftsman or interior designer.

**Integrity and Existing Physical Condition.** Integrity is the authenticity of a furnished interior. Existing conditions can be defined as the current physical state of the interior's spaces, interior architectural features, finishes, furnishings, and interior design. A historic furnished interior can retain its integrity, but be in poor condition, or vice versa.

**Conservation in Context.** Prior to any project work beyond stabilizing objects, the overall consistent appearance of the historic furnished interior must be addressed. In considering the conservation and re-creation of objects, the issues of age, wear, and cleanliness must be discussed. Ideally, a newly conserved or re-created object should not stand out from the assemblage. The treatment and re-creation of objects must be considered within the context of the whole historic furnished interior.

**Use.** Historic, current, and proposed use of the interior must be considered prior to treatment selection. Historic use is directly linked to its significance, while current and proposed use can affect integrity and existing conditions.

**Management and Maintenance.** The institution's overall mission should not be forgotten in the face of planning for a historic furnished interior. It should be determined whether such an interior fits into the mission statement and whether the institution has the resources to commit to such a venture without neglecting other cultural and natural resources. Alternatives to historic furnished interiors are formal exhibits, a period room, series of period rooms, or historic furnished vignettes (furnished portions of rooms).

**Interpretation.** A sound interpretive strategy for a historic site cannot be developed before an interior's history, character-defining features, significance, and integrity are evaluated. Serious mistakes, resulting in the loss of irreplaceable original features, can occur when pre-conceived interpretive goals and management considerations shape treatment decisions. Likewise, interpretive objectives and needs must be considered as part of the planning process.

#### ***Conclusion***

The guidelines are in draft form. The Northeast Museum Services Center is in the early stages of collaborating with Heritage Preservation during the final phases of the project. We need better illustrations of recommended practices from institutions and organizations representing all regions of the country. Once the illustrations are in place, there will be one more review and the document will be published.

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